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for the Blind and  
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## Gathering imagines the future of NLS

What does the future hold for NLS?

How about wireless delivery of materials to talking-book machines, mobile devices, and braille eReaders? Customized products provided to patrons on request? Smaller, simpler, but more sophisticated machines? More braille and foreign-language materials?

Those are just a few of the ideas suggested by representatives from blindness-related consumer groups, regional librarians, and chairs of circulation user groups who joined NLS staff April 15–16 to discuss the

future of the braille and talking book program.

“Our world is changing,” NLS director Karen Keninger told the gathering, “and if we don’t shape our future, our future will be shaped by others. And if we don’t have a clear vision of where we are going, we may not be very happy when we get there. I believe we can shape that future ourselves, if we do it thoughtfully.”

Keninger had invited the group to Washington to examine how NLS will meet its patrons’ evolving needs both

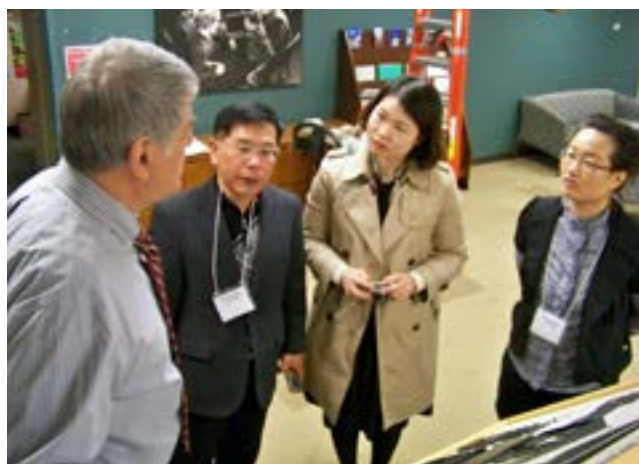
## NLS shares its work with the world

Librarians and other professionals who serve blind and disabled people visit NLS from all over the world to learn about the nation’s braille and talking book program. These are two of the groups that stopped by this spring.



**Muna Alhouti (left) and Mona Abdulkareem Alyafee from Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services in the United Arab Emirates examine a print-braille book with their translator on their visit to NLS on April 23, 2015.**

**Network Division deputy chief Stephen Prine (left) shows Sunsik Choi and Hyun Jung Oh, from the National Library for Individuals with Disabilities in Seoul, South Korea, and their translator (right) a tactile map of the NLS office during their visit on March 24, 2015.**



#### **The Program**

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, publishes books and magazines in braille and in recorded form for readers who cannot hold, handle, or see well enough to read conventional print because of a temporary or permanent visual or physical disability.

Through a national network of state and local libraries, the materials are loaned free to eligible readers in the United States and to U.S. citizens living abroad. Materials are sent to readers and returned by postage-free mail. Most books are also available for download on the NLS Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) website, <https://nlsbard.loc.gov>.

#### **Books and Magazines**

Readers may borrow all types of popular-interest books including bestsellers, classics, mysteries, westerns, poetry, history, biographies, religious literature, children's books, and foreign-language materials. Readers may also subscribe to more than seventy popular magazines in braille and recorded formats.

#### **Special Equipment**

Special equipment needed to play the audiobooks is loaned indefinitely to readers. Amplifiers with headphones are available for eligible readers who are also certified as hearing impaired. Other devices are provided to aid readers with mobility impairments in using playback machines.

#### **Eligibility**

You are eligible for the Library of Congress program if

- You are legally blind—your vision in the better eye is 20/200 or less with correcting glasses, or your widest diameter of visual field is no greater than 20 degrees;
- You cannot see well enough or focus long enough to read standard print, although you wear glasses to correct your vision;
- You are unable to handle print books or turn pages because of a physical handicap; or
- You are certified by a medical doctor as having a reading disability, due to an organic dysfunction, which is of sufficient severity to prevent reading in a normal manner.

#### **How to Apply**

You may request an application by calling toll-free 1-888-NLS-READ or download one from the NLS website at [www.loc.gov/nls](http://www.loc.gov/nls).

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## **The future of NLS**

in the near term and far into the future. Many factors will affect that: Improving medical intervention that reduces blindness and ameliorates disabilities; funding trends in state and local governments; increasing longevity and better health care in general; and the potential adoption of universal accessibility, among them. "I am asking you to make recommendations based on your constituents, your dreams, and your realities," Keninger said.

Discussions focused on five questions about NLS service over the next decade:

- What services do you expect your network library to be providing?
- How will the needs of consumers using this program change?
- What will be the expectations of regional libraries' administering agencies?
- What services do you expect from technology/automation systems?
- What services do you expect from NLS?

Librarians talked about the need for training on new technology and expressed concerns about staffing, storage space, and funding. They want more local recordings and more of the current bestsellers that sighted people are reading. William Reed, regional librarian at the Ohio Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, urged NLS to "go on the offensive to do a better job of getting the word out about what we do."

Technology offers many

opportunities for NLS, but it poses challenges too. "NLS as a public library service has been providing leisure reading for a population that is 70 percent elderly and 100 percent disabled since 1931," Keninger said. "But the competition for this population's attention has increased significantly. Radio, television, computers, smartphones, commercial audiobooks, text-to-speech access on Kindle and the smartphone, relatively inexpensive eBooks, and more and more information available for free online: How will all of this impact who we are and what we do 10 years from now?"

Participants noted that patrons in coming years will be more tech-savvy and more of them will be using BARD (the NLS Braille and Audio Reading Download service) to get books delivered instantly. BARD Mobile, an app that allows patrons to download books onto smart devices, will grow in popularity—but participants said NLS should continue to distribute its digital talking-book machine (DTBM) because people with dexterity challenges and cognitive disabilities find it easy to use. Advances in technology will open up possibilities such as voice-controlled players and simpler record-keeping systems that will improve libraries' customer service.

Strong support was voiced for NLS to begin providing a braille eReader as part of its program. "It is my ambition to have that as part of the NLS program," Keninger said, but noted that it

## Participants

### Consumer Groups

**National Federation of the Blind (NFB):** Tony Olivero, Information and Technology Services

**American Council of the Blind (ACB):** Kim Charlson, Perkins School for the Blind, Perkins Library

**Blinded Veterans Association (BVA):** Al Avina, Executive Director

**NLS:** Judith Dixon, Consumer Relations Officer

**Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA):** Michael York, State Librarian, NH State Library

### Conference Representatives

**Northern:** Marilyn Stevenson, NH State Library Talking Book Services

**Midlands:** William Reed, Ohio Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

**Southern:** Shellie Zeigler, Mississippi Blind and Physically Handicapped Library Services

**Western:** Susan Westin, Oregon State Library Talking Book and Braille Services

Library Automation System Chairs

**Consortium of User Libraries (CUL):** Chris Boynton, Librarian, Maine State Library, Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

**Keystone Library Automation System (KLAS):** James Gleason, Deputy Director, Perkins Library

**Reader Enrollment and Delivery System (READS):** Susan Hammer-Schneider, Librarian, ND State Library Talking Books Department

**Independent:** Ava Smith, Librarian, Texas State Library and Archives Commission

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will first require a change in the legislation that authorized NLS.

Additional suggestions from participants included expanding outreach to eligible people with reading disabilities; stronger partnerships with organizations such as BookShare, Learning Ally, and HathiTrust; and shortening the length of the biennial national conference.

### Already taking steps

To provide a platform for discussions, Keninger and other staff members gave updates on recent changes, accomplishments, and challenges within the NLS program.

In the past three years “our goals have been to maintain quality, leverage technology for better service, increase the number and scope of materials available to our patrons, promote braille literacy, and increase readership,” Keninger said. “We have all worked toward those goals and the results are significant.”

Among the accomplishments of recent years, Keninger cited:

- Updates to BARD, including more user-friendly functions and the addition of locally produced books and magazines
- The development and launch of BARD Mobile for iOS and Android platforms
- The beginning phases of implementing Unified English Braille (UEB)
- The addition of commercially recorded books to the NLS collection
- Launch of the [www.loc.gov/ThatAllMayRead](http://www.loc.gov/ThatAllMayRead) public education website and the NLS Facebook page
- Development of a new NLS integrative brand
- Preparations for a redesign of the NLS website

Materials Development Division (MDD) chief Michael Katzmann brought participants up to date on recent developments and future possibilities of the digital talking-book player.

“The current machine mimics what we had with the cassette player, in that it is a stand-alone unit that plays pre-recorded materials for audio output,” he said. “But we are living in a more interconnected world than we were 10 years ago—people are getting materials in many more ways. We need to look at what we are providing, where we are providing it, and how we are providing it.”

NLS has been exploring ways to improve its talking-book players, including adding wireless capabilities, which would require arrangements with AT&T, Google, and other third-party providers, Katzmann explained.

“We want to give as much choice to our patrons to get as many books as they want—but by giving more choice, the complexity goes up,” he said. The challenge is to build a better machine that takes into account users’ skills. “We don’t want to be in a position where we have to send technicians to everyone’s house.”

Creating a wireless-enabled machine that is intuitive and not too complex, and then producing the actual machines, will “take time and involve a lot of feedback—and money,” Keninger cautioned.

Some participants expressed concerns about patrons who don’t have Internet access. Consumer Relations Officer Judith Dixon predicted that problem will go away over time. “Wi-Fi will become a public utility. Connectivity will be ubiquitous,” she said. “Technology is not going to cost as much and will be like street lights



## The future of NLS

and just ‘be there.’ We spend a lot of time thinking of the technology ‘have nots’ and computer-phobic people. In 10 to 20 years those concerns are going to be gone.”

### Meeting the demand

Patrons want more books, and NLS is working on new ways to meet that demand. It has entered

into cooperative agreements to acquire the collections of commercial audio publishers such as Hachette and Penguin—a move applauded by conference participants. Locally produced books of regional interest are being posted on BARD.

Thousands of older titles on cassette are being digitized. (“Patrons are over the moon because we can duplicate the book and they can listen to it on cartridge instead of on cassette,” said James Gleason, deputy director of the Perkins Library. “We never expected the demand for retrospective titles. It has blown us away.”) And NLS may one day consider using text-to-speech technology to make more talking books available.

But most of these new titles, though available on BARD, will never be mass produced on cartridge. “We don’t have the money, and you don’t have the space, to put all those titles on cartridges and put those cartridges on your shelves,” Keninger said. “And yet we all believe that every patron should have access to every book in the NLS system, regardless of the patron’s physical, technological, or financial circumstances.” The short-term answer, she said, may be duplication on demand.

“We have both the responsibility and the opportunity to make things happen. Now let’s explore, dream, and discover together.”

—NLS Director  
Karen Keninger

NLS is already providing network libraries cartridges they can use to duplicate high-demand books. The first shipment of 200,000 of these peach-colored cartridges went out in April. Conference participants noted that these cartridges are particularly good for fulfilling patron requests for series,

collections of children’s books, and books by the same author. A library that knows many of its patrons love westerns might, for example, put six Louis L’Amour books on one cartridge, Network Division chief Richard Smith said. But duplicating books that patrons request isn’t the only use for these car-

tridges. “You can also load magazines, newsletters, and other local materials on them to distribute to your patrons,” he said.

NLS staff introduced attendees to the BARD Media Manager, a software program NLS is exploring that would make it easier for patrons to download, save, and read books from BARD.

BARD Media Manager could be used with a screen reader to help patrons sort books by type, subject, and author; unzip a file and copy the book directly onto a cartridge; track the materials a patron has read; and provide easy-to-navigate lists with customizable filters.

Keninger wrapped up the meeting with an assignment for attendees: Take the ideas presented over the two-day session back to your constituents and brainstorm. “As leaders, I believe that we have both the responsibility and the opportunity to make things happen,” she said. “Now let’s explore, dream, and discover together.”

## NLS releases BARD Mobile app for Android

After years of development, NLS on June 10 released an Android app for accessing the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) site. BARD Mobile for Android is compatible with tablets and smartphones running Android OS 4.1 and later, and works with Google's free TalkBack screen reader to provide patrons on-the-go access to NLS talking books and magazines. "This is fabulous news!" said NLS director Karen Keninger.

NLS originally awarded contracts for both iOS and Android BARD Mobile apps in the summer of 2012, but while the iOS app was released in the fall of 2013, the Android version ran into unexpected technical difficulties. "There's a much wider variety of Android devices on the market than iOS devices," NLS research and development officer Neil Bernstein said, "and accessibility is less baked-in to the operating system." While the VoiceOver screen reader is inseparable from iOS, for example, some Android manufacturers choose to ship their devices without a screen reader installed.

When the initial contract ended with the app still in early stages of development, NLS chose not to renew it. "We felt that we had the resources in house to complete it and provide a better user experience," explained Michael Katzmann, chief of the NLS Materials Development Division. He tapped Shahriar Shafaat, who joined the NLS Engineering Section in 2012 to work on embedded software for the digital talking-book machine (DTBM), to take on the project.

Before coming to NLS, Shafaat worked on Android apps as a



contractor for the Department of Defense. When Katzmann floated the idea of having him complete the BARD Mobile app, "I got sucked into the challenge," Shafaat said.

For two years, he worked to debug the app, resolving issues with memory usage, redesigning the user interface, and improving its stability.

The new app allows patrons to download talking books and magazines from their BARD wish list and play them on their Android devices. Unlike the iOS app, the graphical user interface does not attempt to replicate the visual appearance of the DTBM. To make the app work on the wide variety of screen sizes found on Android devices, a more flexible design was needed. But most of the functions familiar to iOS app and DTBM users remain, including the ability to adjust speed and tone and set bookmarks.

One feature is missing: the ability to download and read braille books. The decision to release the app without braille support was not made lightly, but the tool used to connect Android devices to refreshable braille devices "isn't at the point where it will support the navigation of a braille book," Bernstein explained. The team decided it was better to give Android-using patrons access to the talking book side of BARD now than to continue to hold the app while waiting for the operating system's braille functionality to improve. NLS is working with the vendor to address the situation.

In addition to braille functionality, NLS hopes to add global speed and tone preferences to future versions of the app.

**During a meeting at the Virgin Islands regional library, NLS deputy director Isabella Marqués de Castilla (standing, fourth from left) talks with (from left) regional librarian Letitia G. Gittens, NLS network consultant MaryBeth Wise, and Gerard Evelyn, a member of the library’s Consumer Advisory Council.**



## **NLS staff helps network libraries in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands overcome challenges**

NLS network libraries in two U.S. territories face challenges ranging from broken air conditioners to lack of technology and training resources. Part of NLS’s mission is to offer support and advice to help meet those challenges.

NLS deputy director Isabella Marqués de Castilla accompanied network consultant MaryBeth Wise on visits in March to the Puerto Rico Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in San Juan and the U.S. Virgin Islands Regional Library for the Visually and Physically Handicapped in Christiansted.

“They have small staffs and are more isolated than other network libraries in the contiguous states that provide the same services,” Marqués de Castilla said. “But the dedication of their staffs and their commitment to serve their readers keep the libraries running. Their administrators support them, and they do a great job despite the difficulties.”

The libraries are remote—about 1,600 miles from NLS headquarters in the District of Columbia—but a network consultant visits them every

two years to evaluate their compliance with standards developed in cooperation with the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association.

The Puerto Rico library’s six full-time employees, headed by Evelyn Torres, serve about 4,500 people. The library’s collection includes more than 22,000 talking books on digital cartridge and 51,000 on the older cassette format. The library also has a small collection of braille books.

While Wise went about the usual network consultant work, Marqués de Castilla talked with the staff in their native Spanish language about their successes and challenges. She also provided translation services during web-based training on using BARD and the new Patron Information and Machine Management System (PIMMS), which records patron information and tracks the inventory of talking-book players and other equipment.

“Reliable Internet access is one of the Puerto Rico library’s biggest needs,” Marqués de Castilla said.

“I had a fruitful conversation with Miguel Hernandez, the Department of Education (DOE) official who oversees the territory’s libraries, about the importance of the library having stable, high-speed Internet connectivity, conferencing equipment for training, and iPads for the staff to use to demonstrate BARD to patrons.”

They also discussed sending the library’s staff to NLS for orientation, training for staff and, since the library doesn’t have its own website, the possibility of including its information on Puerto Rico’s DOE site

The four full-time employees of the Virgin Islands library serve about 200 people and maintain a collection of about 25,000 talking books on digital cartridge and 28,000 on cassette. Regional librarian Letitia Gittens reports to Ingrid A. Bough, the islands’ director of Libraries, Archives and Museums, who spent several years in the U.S. Copyright Office before returning to her native land.

Meeting with Bough, Marqués de Castilla emphasized the need for upgraded computers and technical support, for a fiber optic connection so the Christiansted library can more quickly download books from BARD, and for Gittens to attend the NLS biennial national conference.

In addition, Marqués de Castilla supported staff’s interest in establishing a studio for recording books of local interest, noting the value that patrons across the United States receive from locally recorded books (which NLS recently began adding to BARD).

“Ingrid Bough strongly believes that the Virgin Islands’ blind and disabled residents should have full access to a wide variety of reading materials in audio and braille, and she is a tenacious advocate for the library in the halls of government,” Marqués de Castilla said. “Patrons and staff in the Virgin Islands are fortunate to have her in their corner.”

### **Wisconsin library pitches in for annual braille games**

The Wisconsin Talking Book and Braille Library, in partnership with Audio and Braille Literacy Enhancement (ABLE) and the Vision Forward Association, held the 13th Annual Braille Games in Milwaukee on April 16.

This year’s theme was baseball. Forty children, youth and adult mentors, and staff played games that incorporated braille, including baseball trivia and *Jeopardy*. Members of the Milwaukee School of Engineering baseball team brought baseball equipment that the children could feel and try, and answered questions on how to play the game.

“I think it’s cool to really learn about baseball,” 11-year-old Michael Diaz told Milwaukee’s *Journal Sentinel* newspaper. “I got a chance to hold a baseball.”

After lunch, three of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team’s Famous Racing Sausages came for photo opportunities. Each child received a backpack, a stuffed bear, a baseball, and a braille book, *The Illustrated Rules of Baseball* by Dennis Healy and Patrick McRae (BRW23443). ABLE produced the book, which contains tactile graphics for reference.

The *Journal Sentinel*’s story, video, and photo gallery are at <http://bit.ly/1Drloiw>.



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## Chicago patron and chef opens cafe in Lincoln Park

Chef Laura Martinez, a patron of the Talking Book Center of the Chicago Public Library, in January opened La Diosa, a small café in the Windy City's Lincoln Park neighborhood that offers Mexican comfort food with French touches.

Martinez, who has been blind since infancy, attended the Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary

Arts in Chicago and worked for two years at famed chef Charlie Trotter's eponymous five-star restaurant. She started LaDiosa with help from a local Small Business Development Center, nonprofit small-business lender Accion, and the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services.

As spring turned into summer, Martinez said the restaurant was doing good business, with customers especially drawn to its empanadas and "tartizzas," a cross between a tarte and a pizza.

Martinez apparently is the first blind chef in the United States to open a restaurant—which inspired this comment on Twitter from blind chef Christine Ha, winner of TV's *MasterChef* competition in 2012: "If this blind chef can open her own restaurant, I can too some day."

Courtesy of Harvey Tillis Photography



**Chef Laura Martinez and her husband talk with a Chicago TV reporter during the grand opening of La Diosa in January.**